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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 007298

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SUBJECT: ISLAMIC AFFAIRS MINISTER SHARES PLAN OF ACTION;  
DENOUNCES ATTEMPTS TO USE ISLAM FOR POLITICAL GAIN

REF: A. FBIS-GMP20031101000102

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (B,D)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) During the Ambassador's courtesy call on November 5 on Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Shaykh Ahmad Hilayel, the Minister outlined his priorities in the new cabinet, discussed efforts to challenge extremism and those who would use religious activities to further political agendas, and provided an update of the Ministry's renovation projects at the Holy Sites in Jerusalem. When queried about provocative statements about U.S. policy in Iraq made by a local imam last Friday, Hilayel promised the preacher had spoken on politics "for the first and the last time." He also offered the Ambassador his perspective on the Iraq situation. End Summary.

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MINISTER OUTLINES PRIORITIES  
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2. (C) During the Ambassador's courtesy call on Islamic Affairs Minister Shaykh Ahmad Hilayel, Hilayel shared his vision for the Ministry in the context of the King's vision for a reform-minded, socially-progressive government. He noted that during the Aqaba retreat -- the first of its kind in Jordan's history -- the King emphasized the importance of greater transparency, openness and self-questioning to identify areas of weakness and to improve ministries' performance. In response to the King's solicitation of honest criticisms of the government's performance during the retreat, Hilayel said he suggested that the Council of Ministers get away from the day-to-day issues and focus more on overall programs and strategic thinking to guide the government. He also suggested implementing a program of "regular checkups" -- perhaps at 3-month or annual intervals -- to assess the government's performance and determine next steps.

3. (C) Contrary to the past, the Minister says the work of his Ministry has earned it a position of primary importance within the government. Hilayel said he strives to ensure every decision and project undertaken by the Ministry reflects Islam's respect for peace on the human level, in part to prevent opening the door to extremists. Specifically, the Ministry has instituted an awareness program to educate preachers through various formats, including interfaith dialogue, human rights education, and instruction on globalization and the importance of openness to other cultures.

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USING A "GENTLE BUT FIRM" HAND TO GUIDE THE FAITHFUL  
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4. (C) In a likely reference to the Muslim Brotherhood and its political arm, the Islamic Action Front, Hilayel said the Ministry has taken pre-emptive steps to "close the door" to certain parties that sought to use religion to advance a political agenda. For example, the Ministry has its own centers to teach the Qur'an and has increased its charitable activities, such as iftar banquets and distributing basic items to needy families. In this way, he says, "we take the momentum away from the political activists who seek to use these activities to perpetuate their agenda."

5. (C) He said that a primary goal is to ensure that mosques are not privately-funded and that all fall under the Awqaf ministry's jurisdiction. As such, he said it is important to deal with the mosques "gently but firmly" to ensure outside extremist influences do not spread through Jordan's mosques.

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NO TOLERANCE FOR THE INTOLERANT  
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6. (C) In response to the Ambassador's concerns about provocative statements criticizing U.S. policy in Iraq broadcast live by Jordan state TV from an Amman mosque last Friday (ref), Hilayel said the preacher, Samir al-Qubbaj, was

not appointed by the Awqaf. Rather, he represented the Supreme Judge of the Sharia court. However, he said it was the first time Qubbaj had spoken on politics. "The first time, and the last time," he emphasized forcefully, in English, to make his point during a meeting otherwise conducted all in Arabic. He said action will be taken against the imam because "we don't believe that the pulpit should be used to attack any people or policy." Noting the common U.S. and Jordanian interest in combating religious politicization and extremism, he added, "what touches you, touches us; what upsets you, upsets us."

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ADVICE ON IRAQI SITUATION  
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17. (C) The discussion of Qubbaj provided an opening to Hilayel to offer his perspective on the Iraq situation. He said he wished the U.S. military presence sent to Iraq was bigger, to better deal with the security situation, worrying that the pockets of chaos will spiral into a bigger crisis. Qualifying that he was never supportive of Saddam's regime, he mentioned a saying in Islam that "an unjust state is better than chaos, although there is no good in either." He said Jordan cannot dispute people's "legal right" to protest occupation within boundaries, but it would help if the United States increased the visibility of the reforms and thus give people hope that things are indeed improving. He also urged the United States to "choose the leadership carefully." Hilayel listened attentively as the Ambassador explained that the current Iraqi leadership is only a temporary arrangement until a fairly-elected Iraqi government can emerge, paving the way for a handover of U.S. authority to Iraqis. The Minister agreed that a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq now would be disastrous.

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RESTORATION PROJECTS CONTINUE APACE IN JERUSALEM  
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18. (C) Hilayel says his Ministry remains actively engaged in various restoration projects at the Jerusalem holy sites in conjunction with Israeli authorities. He noted that meticulous work continues to repair the southern wall of the Haram al-Sharif compound, and that another team is helping install a fire alarm system. He said that Jordanian engineers are assisting in the repair of part of the wall that has collapsed inside the al-Aqsa mosque. (Note: The Minister's overall positive description of their work on the Haram al-Sharif is in stark contrast to a conversation somewhat over a year ago when Jordanian-Israeli cooperation was quite strained.)

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) The Minister was gracious and articulate during the hour-long meeting with the Ambassador. He conveyed a strong sense of empowerment as he discussed his Ministry's role in "guiding" religious life to ensure moderation prevails among Jordan's faithful. Whereas some might criticize the Ministry's control of the mosques as contrary to the King's stated goal of increasing democratization -- and by extension freedom of speech -- the Minister openly acknowledged that failing to do so could open the door to extremist elements. While Minister Hilayel was clearly embarrassed about Qubbaj's sermon, his forceful reaction confirms that the statement does not represent Jordanian official policy and that steps have been taken to prevent a recurrence at Friday's "official" televised sermon.  
GNEHM